

# **INDIAN VIEWS ON THE NATO-RUSSIA CONTROVERSY ON BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENCE: PRESSURE ON RUSSIA MAY CREATE A STRATEGIC VOID FILLED BY CHINA**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Moscow remains bitterly opposed to NATO's missile shield.
- American and Allied efforts to persuade Russia that it is not aimed at that country and that its capabilities are limited and pose no threat to her nuclear arsenal are going nowhere, with Moscow sceptical on both counts.
- Indian voices are stressing that by pushing Russia too far and denting her nuclear arsenal, the West could "create a strategic void, which only China can fill".
- This observation, usually overlooked in recent diplomatic and academic exchanges, may provide a basis for some sort of accommodation between the two old Cold War enemies, currently threatened, like India, by China's rise.
- Such contributions are proof of the intellectual benefits of having India accepted as a full member of the nuclear club, following the US-India civil nuclear deal, which de facto amended the NPT (Non Proliferation Treaty).

## **INTRODUCTION: AN INDIAN VOICE STRESSES A FORGOTTEN FACTOR**

The deployment by NATO of a missile shield in Europe has been a major source of contention with Moscow over the last few years. Despite repeated assurances by Washington and Brussels that it is not aimed at Russia, but rather at Iran and other rogue regimes and non-state actors, Moscow remains extremely hostile to the project<sup>1</sup>. The main reason is that it threatens to put a dent on the value of her strategic nuclear deterrent, not only one of the mainstays of her Armed Forces but one of the main elements granting it a superpower status, despite her failure to modernize the economy.

Recent BMD (Ballistic Missile Defence) conferences in Moscow and London have exposed, once more, these radical differences, with participants unable to find common ground on which to build a true partnership between Russia and the West, despite the efforts on both sides to be polite and appear reasonable.

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<sup>1</sup> While remaining silent on Japanese work on this area, conducted in cooperation with the US. This is in some ways odd, since Tokyo's progress poses the same challenges and, furthermore, the recent decision to relax weapons exports guidelines makes it even more likely that any resulting technologies will be shared with NATO countries. CALVO Alex, "Japan's Missile Defense Will Concern Russia", *Shingetsu News Agency Newsletter*, 23 July 2011, Shingetsu News Agency, available at <http://shingetsublog.jugem.jp/>.

Whereas NATO stresses the missile defence system's intentions (to deal with a limited attack by a country like Syria or Iran, or a non-state actor) and limited capabilities (unable to deal with a large number of simultaneous launches, and located away from the main paths that a Russian attack on the US would resort to, namely over the North Pole), Russia demands legally binding guarantees on the former and does not trust that the latter will not later grow to effectively be able to destroy most of the missiles to be launched in a mass attack.

Last week, the prestigious London-based think-tank Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) held another Missile Defence Conference<sup>2</sup>, and again allied and Russian views were reinstated, with no significant common ground being found<sup>3</sup>. However, Ambassador Kanwal Sibal, a former Foreign Secretary of India, made a brief reference to an aspect of the dispute which is often, at least in public, overlooked: he pointed out that his country is concerned that "so much obsession with Russia threatens to create a strategic void, which only China can fill"<sup>4</sup>.

## THE ROOTS OF THE DISPUTE BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND MOSCOW

The relative merits of defence and offence in the nuclear era quickly became apparent during the early years of the Cold War, and above all after both superpowers developed the hydrogen bomb, when American strategic thinkers began pondering whether it was possible to protect one's population, industry, and Armed Forces, from an enemy strike.

Gradually, a view emerged that it was not only impractical, as well as extremely expensive, to try to shield one's territory and population, but that successful steps in that direction may make it more, instead of less, likely for a crisis to end up leading to a nuclear exchange. The reasoning, although a bit macabre, is quite simple: if one thinks he can defend himself, he may be tempted to attack, whereas if one knows he is doomed should hostilities break, then he will have the most powerful incentive to avoid war.

It must be stressed that these views emerged gradually, had to compete with alternatives stressing defence, and only came to full fruition when the dual development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and the hydrogen bomb, and the accumulation of massive stocks of both, coupled with the former's poor accuracy, allowed the US and the USSR to enjoy a "second strike capability". That is, no matter who initiated an exchange, the recipient could launch enough missiles to destroy the aggressor, so that at the end of the day, no matter who had initiated a war, both countries would be destroyed, both would have lost it. This became known as MAD (mutual assured destruction).

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<sup>2</sup> "RUSI Missile Defence Conference 2012", Royal United Services Institute (London), 30-31 May 2012, program available at <http://www.rusi.org/missiledefence/programme2012>

<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, in spite of this the conference was most interesting, featuring a number of top participants and experts in the field and providing the most ample learning opportunities.

<sup>4</sup> According to RUSI rules, speakers intervene off the record in the questions and answer sessions, where Ambassador Sibal made these remarks, and can only be quoted with their express permission. The author sought such permission and would like to record his gratitude to Ambassador Sibal not only for his positive response but for the help and assistance provided in the writing of this paper.

Despite some work on missile defence by both the Americans and the Soviets, Washington and Moscow soon came to realize that its development threatened the strategic equilibrium reached, and furthermore, that it opened the door to a second armaments race. That is, on the one hand if one of the superpowers managed to build a working missile shield, it may be tempted to launch a nuclear attack during a crisis, or at least the threshold to take such a decision would be lowered. On the other hand, if both superpowers kept working on this area and even increased the tempo of their research, they could find themselves engaged in another costly competition, draining away their economic resources and imposing a stiff opportunity cost on their military. The result was the ABM Treaty, which severely limited the sites to be deployed by the USSR and the US, and effectively gave a lease of life to MAD.

The end of the Cold War, however, and a “new” (or rather not so new) security scenario, gradually provided momentum to the proponents of missile defence, also emboldened by the perceived role in the end of the Cold War of the SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative) launched by the Reagan Administration, a strong confidence in American technological prowess (plus the country’s “can do” approach), and a certain moral uneasiness at the foundation of national defence on the perceived unwillingness of an enemy to trade total destruction.

This led to plans to build a missile shield, first aimed at protecting US territory and based on some bilateral agreements with Central European countries, and later taken over by NATO on a broader multilateral basis and explicitly addressed at Iran and other nearby threats and the current capabilities enjoyed by such countries.

Russia, a country which has to a large extent recovered from the fall of the Soviet Union, on the back of high oil and other commodity prices, a realistic approach to foreign policy (including a willingness to use or threaten to use force when necessary), and the emergence of more immediate threats to the West, thus found herself facing a potentially fatal development. Even in the darker post-Soviet times, with her prestige and actual power lower than ever, Moscow could always count on her mighty nuclear arsenal to be reckoned with as a major power. It was something that gave her prestige and assured her of a seat at many tables. All this could change if BMD became a reality.

Should NATO develop a working missile shield, and despite many pessimistic forecasts there is no reason to believe that given enough time and funds this is not possible, then the military value of Russian strategic nuclear forces would clearly diminish. Once Moscow, although nobody is saying these are her intentions, lost the ability to destroy the US and her allies, she would remain a major regional power, no doubt about that, but she would no longer enjoy that distinguished characteristic making her unique in the concert of nations. Furthermore, although engaged in major military reforms since 2008, these will still take some years to bear fruit, during which time Moscow’s nuclear weapons will remain the main foundation of her national defence, as evidenced by her continued reluctance to cut her tactical nuclear arsenals in the face of conventional inferiority vis a vis Beijing.

These are the roots of the strong controversy between the Russian Federation and the Atlantic Alliance. Whereas Washington and Brussels are determined to build a missile shield, for a variety of reasons which at least publicly don’t include Russia, Moscow

sees how this could sooner or later deal a mortal blow to her prestige and national security.

Of course, should the plans go ahead, as it seems they will, Moscow may react by modernizing her nuclear strategic forces, but this would require a major funding effort, and would therefore demand that her long-delayed “modernization” take place, since otherwise the price tag may be so high as to strangle the civilian sector.

On the American and allied side, political leaders and officials have gone to great lengths in their attempt to reassure their Russian counterparts, stressing both that the BMD system is not aimed at that country and that even if it were it would only be able to deal with a few missiles at a time, and never with a whole volley. The former point is defended by, for example, pointing at the location of some of its key assets, to the south of Russian silos aiming at the US on a North Pole trajectory. The second both with an offer to share information and technical data and by pointing out that the threat in mind is a non-state actor or a rogue regime, unlikely to have a big arsenal at their disposal. However, Russians are reluctant to be convinced on either count. Concerning the aim of the system, they tend to stress capabilities, which objectively threaten the above mentioned strategic equilibrium and value of the Russian arsenal. With regard to the system’s capabilities, even conceding that they may currently be limited they see no reason why they should not keep moving forward until effectively able to deal with a large amount of missiles fired simultaneously. We can finally note that the decision by the Obama administration, accepted and confirmed by NATO, to switch to a naval based system, while designed among other reasons to avoid a direct encroachment on Russia’s perceived sphere of influence provides the ability to redeploy it to waters directly astride the path of Russian ICBMs, something that the Arctic Ocean’s gradual meltdown may facilitate in the future.

For all these reasons, it is unlikely that NATO and Russia may achieve much other than “agreeing to disagree”, unless either is ready to renounce to some of its basic security and defence tenets. Does this mean that we are faced with an impossible conundrum?

## INDIAN VIEWS ON THE BMD CONTROVERSY BETWEEN NATO AND RUSSIA

Not necessarily, but what must be made clear is that nice words, such as calling each other “friends and partners”<sup>5</sup>, will not do the trick. Some fresh thinking is called for, and this could well come from India. Japan may also provide a valuable contribution, of course, but perhaps both the country’s “normalization” as a military power<sup>6</sup> and her growing economic and energy partnership with Russia<sup>7</sup> are not yet mature enough to

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<sup>5</sup> Both often heard at the RUSI conference.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive study of Japan’s normalization, see HUGUES Christopher, *Japan’s Remilitarisation*, Adelphi Papers, Issue 403, London, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> For the case of coal, see CALVO Alex, “Prospects and Obstacles for Increased Russian Coal Sales to Japan”, *TESS Working Papers*, 5 May 2012, The Eurasia Studies Society (TESS), available at [http://eurasiasociety.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/japan-russia-coal-\\_calvo\\_.pdf](http://eurasiasociety.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/japan-russia-coal-_calvo_.pdf), for the nuclear industry see CALVO Alex, “Moscow Remains Hopeful of Nuclear Trade with Japan”, *Shingetsu News Agency News*, 01 May 2012, Shingetsu News Agency, available at [http://www.shingetsunewsagency.com/SNA/SNA\\_News/Entries/2012/5/2\\_Moscow\\_Remains\\_Hopeful\\_of\\_Nuclear\\_Trade\\_with\\_Japan.html](http://www.shingetsunewsagency.com/SNA/SNA_News/Entries/2012/5/2_Moscow_Remains_Hopeful_of_Nuclear_Trade_with_Japan.html), and more generally see CALVO Alex, “Incentives for a Tokyo-

allow Tokyo to play such a role, which also demands a successful conclusion to her current nuclear negotiations with New Delhi<sup>8</sup>.

At the RUSI Conference, Ambassador Kanwal Sibal, referred to an often overlooked aspect of NATO BMD plans: their potential impact on the worldwide balance of power, and more precisely, on China. His words were particularly valuable at least for three reasons: first of all because they provided some fresh thinking on this matter, second because they linked the debate on European and Asian missile defence, which despite the geographical distances involved are more closely related than they seem, and third because they provided some realistic and state-centred fresh air.

Sibal explained that Indians were concerned that “so much obsession with Russia threatens to create a strategic void, which only China can fill”. This is a major point sadly overlooked by many experts. Why may that be so? In a sense, although they are happy to accuse each other of having a “Cold War mentality” in discussions on BMD, both Western (European in particular) and Russian officials suffer from a certain “Atlantic-centrism” which indeed brings to mind the old days of the Cold War, or to be more precise the old days of the earlier stages of the Cold War, until Nixon’s famous trip to China. In the first years of the Cold War, many in the West saw Asia as a backwater, a theatre that should never absorb too much political capital or military resources, for fear of weakening Europe, where the ultimate confrontation between communism and capitalism would be played out. The words of General Bradley concerning the Korean War were clear, he said it was “the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy<sup>9</sup>”, and US policy towards Vietnam in the immediate aftermath of WWII was also hostage to this perceived supremacy of European interests. The Soviet Union, while concerned with her long borders and active in Asia, similarly considered Europe and the Atlantic to be much more important. Nowadays, we see how Moscow attacks almost on a daily basis NATO plans for missile defence, while seemingly ignoring Japanese work on this area. At the same time, while many European countries, suffering from the loss of a true worldwide view of security and defence issues, seem to ignore the perils of Chinese rearmament and longing for the old “Tribute System”, a lot of Russians share this attitude, and seem happy to, for example, see China build a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan while strongly opposing a similar infrastructure connecting that country to the Old Continent. India, on the other hand, being a neighbour of China, and having bitter experiences such as the 1962 brief war with Beijing or the latter’s provision of nuclear technology to Pakistan, is acutely aware of the need to have a more balanced view of the world’s defence and security scenario.

Concerning the role of states, not only is the NATO missile shield officially designed to provide security from launches by rogue regimes and non-state actors, but these two categories have come to monopolize the strategic thinking in many Western countries,

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Moscow Rapprochement", *The Tokyo Diplomat*, 19 March 2012, Shingetsu News Agency, available at [www.shingetsunewsagency.com](http://www.shingetsunewsagency.com).

<sup>8</sup> Following Australia’s decision to sell uranium with India, an agreement with Japan has become the last nail in the coffin of the bitterly denounced “nuclear apartheid” suffered by India for decades. See CALVO Alex, “Japan Debates Whether to Allow Nuclear Trade with India”, *Shingetsu Newsletter*, No 1598, 12 June 2010, Shingetsu Institute for the Study of Japanese-Islamic Relations, available at <http://www.shingetsuinstitute.com/home.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted, among others, in “Lessons From the Korean War”, *Time*, 7 February 1955, available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,823712,00.html>

which seem unable to imagine scenarios where they would be forced to go to conventional war with a non-failed nation-state. This is a mistake first of all because it ignores the historical reality that one cannot choose one's enemies<sup>10</sup>, and second, because although terrorist groups are often labelled "non-state actors" many are clearly not. India's painful experience of repeated Pakistani-sponsored terrorist attacks is a powerful reminder that what often appears to be a terrorist organization is often a policy instrument at the hands of a state.

Going back to China, although India is clearly interested in engaging Beijing, an intention shared with Tokyo and Washington, she is at the same time seriously concerned not only about Beijing's military build-up, often taking place with little transparency, but with her unwillingness or inability to settle once and for all the border disputes and other controversies affecting the bilateral relations with her neighbours. With the exception of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries, and even there one will often hear complaints from Central Asian citizens, Beijing has not been able to secure lasting settlements with her neighbours, and for example keeps claiming most of the South China Sea, while pushing for an interpretation of the rights of coastal states quite distinct from their standard, universally recognized limits.

Although India still has to contend with Pakistani-sponsored terrorism, while facing internal security challenges, her main concern remains Beijing. This is nothing new, as a quick look at the parliamentary debates on nuclear policy in the 1950s makes clear<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, in spite of her improved and currently quite deep relations with Washington, New Delhi retains a close connection with Moscow, with which it shares many security concerns, in Central Asia for example. Therefore the country may be uniquely positioned to participate in the BMD debate with fresh points of view going beyond the often repeated arguments one tends to hear.

More generally, India is aware that Russia, as a strong country, is one of the keys to preventing the domination of Asia by Beijing. Although it is natural for the West to desire the integration in her security architecture of countries long part of her cultural sphere, regardless of their geographical proximity to Russia, a global perspective requires that this is not taken to extremes threatening to create what Ambassador Sibal called a "strategic void". It would serve no purpose to reinforce relations with countries in the Pacific, an essential component of the so called "Pivot to the Pacific", only to see China able to redeploy all of her might there once she had succeeded in turning Russia into little more than a junior partner and energy supplier<sup>12</sup>. Moscow is aware of this danger, and this is not only one of the major factors in her 2008 decision to radically reform her Armed Forces, but is also one of the forces behind the ambitions to develop

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<sup>10</sup> A mistake by successive British governments in concentrating on the country's NATO role while ignoring the military threat to the Falklands. When war broke out, London required an amphibious capability not included in British main naval NATO role, which was antisubmarine warfare, and London was not supported by the whole Atlantic Alliance, since the islands were not covered by NATO Treaty's Article 5. It is essential for a country to have the capability of fighting all sorts of wars.

<sup>11</sup> PERKOVICH George, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Even if Russia never joins any alliance, formal or informal, with the West and countries like Japan or India, as long as she remains strong and independent from China, she limits the amount of military power that Beijing is able to project on the Pacific. In a way, she plays the same role as China in WWII, when Nanking failed to win any major battle with the Imperial Japanese Army but by stubbornly refusing to surrender soaked up many divisions which could not be deployed elsewhere.

her Far East Regions and plans to build energy transportation infrastructures on her Pacific Coast and across the Korean Peninsula<sup>13</sup>, so that China is just one of many available customers, and not a monopoly buyer of her natural resources.

The concerns about China are shared by Washington, and therefore it makes sense to take them into account in the field of missile defence also. More broadly, a greater Russian focus on the Pacific may provide an opportunity for closer and more cooperative relations with the West, since whereas in areas like the Black Sea or the Caucasus some friction is bound to remain in the foreseeable future, the two share many interests in the Asia-Pacific region. In a way, just as Nixon saw the chance to weaken the USSR by reaching an accommodation with China, perhaps the time may have come to get closer to Russia in order to limit the scope for a Chinese domination of the Asian continent, where Russia is already playing a significant role in, for example, supplying submarines to Vietnam<sup>14</sup>.

## INDIA: A WELCOME PARTNER IN THE NUCLEAR DEBATE

Regardless of what one may think of Ambassador Sibal's words, his contribution to the debate on NATO BMD is proof that the full acceptance of India's nuclear program, leaving behind the attempts to constrain it<sup>15</sup>, not only makes sense from a moral and strategic view, but is also beneficial for the quality of the democracies' debate in the nuclear and missile sphere. Whereas some decades ago, energies were directed on the one hand at limiting India's progress in these fields, and on the others at combating the NPT, now the US, Europe, Japan, and other democratic countries, can join India in discussing these matters for their common benefit.

## CONCLUSIONS

China's aggressive posture poses a threat both to Russia and the US and her allies, despite the former's effort at avoiding any public discussion of the same. However, this is often overlooked in discussions on nuclear and missile matters, and in particular in the controversy over NATO's BMD program. India, a fellow maritime democracy and a neighbour of China, plus a country having a good relationship with both the US and Russia, is uniquely placed to offer some ideas which may help break the current impasse. This is a more realistic view than simply insisting that Russia and NATO are "friends and partners" while repeating that the NATO missile shield is not aimed at Russia and does not have the ability and the geographical location to significantly affect

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<sup>13</sup> CALVO Alex, "North Korean Leader's Trip to Russia Opens Window of Opportunity", *Shingetsu News Agency Newsletter*, 30 August 2011, Shingetsu News Agency, available at <http://shingetsublog.jugem.jp/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ironically, we see again the Russians playing a former Chinese role, this time during the Cold War.

<sup>15</sup> Actually, some voices in the US proposed the supply of a nuclear device to India so that Red China was not the first Asian power to test an atomic bomb, but such ideas went nowhere and non-proliferation ideals gradually took precedence over strategic thinking. US-Indian nuclear relations also suffered from the poor state of bilateral relationships during much of the 1960s and 1970s. For the proposals to supply India with the bomb see PERKOVICH George, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000, p. 52-53.

the value of Moscow's nuclear deterrent, arguments which have been repeatedly rejected by Russian leaders.

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